THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) and (b) According to a report in the official Bhutanese bi-weekly newspaper, Kuensel, a 169 ft. tall Buddha statue in bronze is to be built by a private Bhutanese NGO (Menjong Chhötheun Tshogpa) to commemorate 100 years of the monarchy in Bhutan. The work on statue began in end 2004 and is expected to be completed by 2007.

(c) The rock Buddha statue at Bamyan was completely destroyed during the Taliban regime. We are not aware of any proposal for the reconstruction of the statue.

(d) Not applicable.

Amritsar-Nankana Sahib bus service

953. SHRIMATI HEMA MALINI: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that both the Government have decided to defer the bus service between Amritsar and Nankana Sahib in Pakistan;

(b) if so, the reasons therefor;

(c) whether it has been deferred temporarily or permanently; and

(d) by when it is expected to be started?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) to (d) Talks to finalise the arrangements for starting the Amritsar-Nankana Sahib bus service, scheduled for 25-26 October 2005, were postponed due to the earthquake of October 8. The next meeting on Amritsar-Nankana Sahib bus service is scheduled for 20-21 December 2005.

Discussion with Iranian Vice-President

954. SHRI LALIT SURI: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether former Minister of External Affairs had a meeting with Iran's Vice-President in Moscow in October last;

(b) if so, the nature of discussions held during the meeting and the conclusions arrived at; and

(c) the steps taken by the two countries to implement them?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) and (b) Former External Affairs Minister met Iranian First Vice-President Parviz Dawoodi on 26th October 2005 in Moscow on the sidelines of the Heads of Government Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in which both India and Iran are observers. During the meeting, the state of bilateral relations including trade was discussed. Former EAM expressed India's satisfaction at the ongoing cooperation with Iran in the energy sector. There was also an exchange of views on Iran's nuclear issue.

(c) India and Iran have imparted a strategic dimension to their relations with cooperation covering fields including hydrocarbons, trade, transit, and science and technology cooperation. Bilateral discussions have been formalized through Joint Commission meetings, Strategic dialogue between the two sides and a Joint Working Group on the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline.

American Disagreement On Indo-Iran Gas Pipeline Project

955. SHRI KARNENDU BHATTACHARJEE: Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that USA showed its disagreement on Indo-Iran Pipeline Project;

(b) if so, whether this was taken up by the Prime Minister during his visit to USA with the US President; and

(c) if so, the outcome thereof and if not, the reasons therefore?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI RAO INDERJIT SINGH): (a) The US has shown its concern over the Iran gas pipeline issue. During her visit to India, Secretary of State Dr. Condoleeza Rice stated at a press conference on March 16, 2005 " I think our views concerning Iran are well-known by this time and we have communicated to the Indian Government our concerns about the gas pipeline cooperation between Iran and India".

(b) and (c) The issue of India-Iran gas pipeline project has not figured in the discussions that Prime Minister has had with the US President. Regarding the Indo-Iran gas pipeline Prime Minister has said,"... that's a decision between us and Iran. I don't think outside parties have any role in